

Sermon 22.12.11

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Psalm 115: 9-15 (translation by Wilda Gafney)

One: Israel, trust in the HOLY ONE of OLD!

Many: *Their help and their shield is she.*

One: House of Aaron, trust in the HOLY ONE of SINAI!

Many: *Their help and their shield is she.*

One: You who revere the HOLY ONE, trust in the HOLY ONE!

Many: *Their help and their shield is she.*

One: The FAITHFUL ONE remembers us; she will bless;

Many: *she will bless the house of Israel;*

She will bless the house of Aaron.

One: SHE will bless those who revere GOD WHO IS HOLY,

Many: *both small and great.*

One: May the GENEROUS ONE add to, increase, you all,

Both you and your children.

Many: *May you all be blessed by the AGELESS ONE,*

Maker of the heavens and the earth.

Judges 13: 2-7

There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children. And the messenger of the Holy One appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Although you are barren, having never given birth, you shall conceive and give birth to a son. Now be on guard not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, for you shall conceive and give birth to a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.' Then the woman came and told her husband, 'Someone from God came to me, and their appearance was like that of a messenger of God, incredibly awesome; I did not ask the angel from where they came, and their name they did not tell me; yet they said to me, "You shall conceive and give birth to a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing taboo, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death." '

Luke 1: 46-56

And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

SERMON

Stories - our bible is a huge collection of stories. Some that we love to tell over and over - ones that are central to our understanding of Emmanuel - God with us.

The bible - this diverse set of stories - is a story of relationship; relationship between God and us, humanity. Stories that confound, confuse, comfort and remind us that as broken as we are, God seeks us; seeks us out. Stories of God's goodness and hope found in dark places.

That, my friends, is good news. That foundation that God seeks us, seeks to be in relationship with, seeks to save us from our humanness - that's the starting place of seeking to understand these sometimes incomprehensible stories.

Lily just recited the Magnificat - Mary's 'song of praise' - she's rejoicing in the One who saves - who does great things - who over generations has continued to be in relationship with the people, Israel. *God has helped Israel, according to the promise made to our ancestors, she sings, Abraham and all his descendants.*

Yes, Mary proclaims that the Mighty One has done great things - shown strength with his arm; scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

This God that Mary praises, and the one she carries, who is yet to come, is not exactly one of peace and tranquility.

No, he is going to turn the world upside down, in ways that don't make sense to our everyday way of being.

This book of scripture has beautiful stories, troubling stories, comforting stories. Some that are hard to know what to do with.

Our advent scriptures have focused on women - Hagar, Sarah, Mary, Elizabeth, and today this unnamed woman, the mother of Samson, involving miraculous conceptions, and annunciations - angels appearing - entering into conversation with these women - announcing new life forming in places that were considered barren.

Over the weeks, I have become more and more uncomfortable with our hearing these miracle stories. They are a specific type of miracle - women being chosen, sometimes invited, sometimes not given a choice, to become human incubators of new life.

In traditional readings these women are all but reduced to biological functions, a function which not all women have or choose to perform, writes theologian Wilda Gafney.¹

Yes - that's my struggle. We engage these stories and these women in reductionistic ways - they are present to serve a specific purpose in God's larger story. To bring about biological life.

But what about those in our day and time who pray and hope and yearn and go to extraordinary measures to try and conceive, carry and give birth to a child, and their prayers and efforts - they seem to go unanswered? How do we hold these stories in the eyes of such families?

What are we to do with these stories when our reality is so utterly and profoundly different?

In the United States, **10% to 15%** of couples are infertile.²

Infertility, also known as INVOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS - so often this is met with feelings of shame and inadequacy - of feeling alone, isolated, with few spaces to share and have their stories held.

¹Gafney, Wilda. 2021. *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church. Year W.* Church Publishing Inc, NY.

²[Infertility - Symptoms and causes - Mayo Clinic](https://www.mayoclinic.org › infertility › syc-20354317)<https://www.mayoclinic.org › infertility › syc-20354317>

Involuntary childlessness can show up in many forms - the inability to conceive; miscarriage; stalled adoption; infant death - it's here, in our midst, the grief sometimes hard to speak aloud.

While involuntary childlessness hasn't been my experience, my personal losses, the death of my mom when I was in my 20's and husband 10 years later - they profoundly changed the way I heard the miracle stories of the bible. Where was the God I had learned of - the one who provides miraculous interventions? I felt abandoned. Forgotten. Emmanuel - God with us - was for others, not me.

In recent months, I have been walking beside a dear friend and her spouse who have been struggling with involuntary childlessness, and undergoing all sorts of medical procedures. Two weeks ago they texted, asking to be held in prayer, as eggs were being extracted and would be fertilized and tested for viability. Days followed by long nights of waiting; waiting in prayer, waiting in darkness.

On Tuesday I got this short, two lined text: "We do not have any embryos. Just do not know what to say"

The darkness of this season is real for some.

What do these stories have to offer to us in this season of Advent, of waiting in darkness for new life to be born? Where might we find God with us?

The women in our stories and so much more than human incubators, writes Gafney: They are theologians and divine conversation partners...

And so when our biblical stories don't make much sense at first glance, don't relate to our lives, I realize the need to dig deeper, to approach them in creative, metaphorical ways.

Our scripture this morning, from the 13th chapter of the book of Judges, comes at a time of great suffering for the people of Israel. For decades they have been fighting both the foreigner and fighting one another. There is little sense of cohesion for these various tribes who claim Yahweh as God. We enter the story today in a time when the Philistines have oppressively ruled for 40 years. A long time. Generations.

Let's hold this story, this promise of new life that will bring about great change for a people - let's hear this promise not just as the biological birth of a person, but as new life that anyone one of us can bring forth - male or female. For we are all, *all*, called to be incubators of hope and change.

It's here, in this bleakness, this dark moment of history, that this nameless woman, wife of Manoah, has a strange encounter.

A messenger shows up and speaks to her - a person on the margins - a woman without name and without child.

The first thing to note is that she takes this conversation seriously - goes and tells her husband that 'someone from God came to me, and their appearance was like that of a messenger of God, incredibly awesome'. In the midst of her ordinary life, this unseen, unnamed person has an encounter with the Divine. She listens, takes it in, and is willing to be changed.

"...I did not ask the angel from where they came, and their name they did not tell me", she goes on;

yet they said to me, "You shall conceive and give birth to a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing taboo, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death." '

A nazirite is one, man or woman, who voluntarily took a vow to be 'holy unto God'. They are consecrated, made holy, separated and sacred.

There's a promise of something new about to happen. And it will require something of her - she needs to be an active participant in the work of the Divine. Now, in this time of carrying the new life, she is summoned to change her life. This woman, and the new life she carries, are both consecrated, separated, they have holy work to do.

That curious messenger proclaimed: "It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines."

They both have holy work to do - hers now, in the nurture of this new one, his as one who *begins* the work of deliverance.

If you go on and read about this Nazirite - named Samson, his was not a holy life. Really, just the opposite - not your model and upright leader. And by the end of his life, even through his death, outwardly, for the Israelite people, not much had changed. They continued to be oppressed by the Philistines.

That angel, long ago, before his birth, proclaimed the life this woman was to give birth to would begin to deliver Israel from these oppressors - it was many years after Samson that any real change took place.

And yet... and yet the messenger brought a message of newness.

All this unnamed woman could do was to act out her part. To listen carefully, to be willing to change and to move forward into the unknown with faith. She was given a task - to live in a way that made the ordinary sacred. As a nazirite, her entire way of being became 'holy unto God'.

She listened, and responded with a yes.

She chose to live in a way that was 'holy unto God'.

What an act of courage!

Not so different than Mary and Elizabeth as well.

Maybe, on a metaphorical level, there are times when darkness is here, with little evidence of new life, for long, long seasons of time...and there are times when, in darkness, we are summoned to step into something new - to be open to change and to carry new life within, and give it birth.

How might we live in ways that are holy, sacred?

To what are we called to carry, to grow and to bring into the world as new life?

Ross is going to bring us a song with lyrics written in the 9th century. - *Creator of the stars of night*, it has beautiful words, listen carefully, with the chorus a repeating 'hosanna'.

Hosanna is a curious word - it's a "both and" word - it's a plea, a cry for help - 'please, save us', and it's used to praise God - an expression of joy and praise for anticipated deliverance. Kind of like the word joy is a "both and" word.

This week we lit the candle of joy...

"Joy," writes Henri Nouwen, "is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, or even death — can take that love away."

Thus joy and sorrow can not only coexist; joy can even be found in the midst of sorrowful circumstances³.

In this season of darkness, where we accompany women on the margins.

I don't imagine any of the women of our biblical stories expected they would be the ones to carry that new life.

³ <https://henrinouwen.org/meditations/joy/>

I imagine they might have been paralyzed by fear at what was being asked of them.

Joy - knowing that we are loved, no matter what - that nothing, no thing, can take that love away.

To those who live in the shadows of involuntary childlessness -

May you know, deep within, that this path you're on might be one of the most difficult seasons of your lives. But, it doesn't mean that God has left you or loves you any less. May you seek out wisdom that reminds you of this truth. (from Elizabeth Evans Hagan blog)⁴

Newness comes in all sorts of ways. Often not how we imagine - we live in sorrow for the dreams unfulfilled. We need to dig deep to find that joy in the midst of sorrow.

Jesus, the one for whom we wait this season, invites us to see ourselves as we truly are - beloved children of God. Immanuel invites us to live our common, ordinary lives in new ways.

Can we sing hosanna - God, save us AND hold a sense of joy, knowing that God's love offers new life for us all?

Perhaps that's the new life we're called to - save us. Come, God of love, show us the way, your way.

RESOURCES USED:

[Preaching + Fertility Struggles - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

[\(PDF\) "Toward A Feminist Christian Vision of Gestational Surrogacy" \(2019\) | Grace Y Kao - Academia.edu](#)

⁴ <https://goodfaithmedia.org/dont-shut-down-if-you-struggle-with-infertility-cms-24090/>